

Leadership Principles and Concepts for Emergency Response Forces

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Blessed are the people whose leaders can look destiny in the eye without flinching but also without attempting to play God.

—Henry Kissinger
Years of Upheaval

A quality-focused organization can be very effective in emergency responses and in adapting to the dynamic challenges it faces during a crisis. However, most people placed in a leadership position during a crisis will resort to a very authoritative approach because of the way crises develop. In a crisis, leaders are taken by surprise. They feel they must make decisions rapidly, and they perceive that decisions must be made at the highest levels in the organization.¹ Also, many people who are assigned as on-scene commanders have little or no experience in crisis situations. It is vital that senior leaders not change their leadership style nor tear down the chain of command. Ideally, in a crisis, empowerment, planning, trust, teamwork, and the chain of command must be allowed to work.

Quality Skeptics

Skeptics of the Total Quality Management concept, which is reinventing government, sweeping public business, and being implemented throughout the Air Force, will say that using quality in an emergency is absurd. Many believe “Quality stops when a crisis starts.”² They believe that during an emergency there is no time to pull out the Pareto charts or form a process action team to make group decisions. Quality can easily apply to business undertakings when there is a widget to sell or a profit sheet to balance. Most skeptics believe quality could never apply to combat or emergency operations. When faced with an emergency or crisis situation, most leaders will personally take charge and control every detail of the situation. Many senior leaders in the Air Force, especially current group commanders who were raised in the

shadows of macho leaders from the past, will have a direct command-and-control mentality trying to micromanage each and every aspect of the emergency response efforts. At many Air Force installations, when the disaster control group (DCG) is formed at an incident site, the on-scene commander will require each member to stand on a placard on the ground.³ In addition, communication between DCG members is channeled through the on-scene commander to control every decision concerning the incident.

Many times this micromanagement type of leadership is a result of unfamiliarity with emergency response operations. These leaders are “rookies” in the position of the on-scene commander, but are very senior in the Air Force with many years of experience in leadership positions. They are also first-time leaders in this type of crisis, since the vast majority of senior officers in the Air Force have never been firefighters, medics, or security policemen. Senior leaders in the Air Force come from an officer corps made up of broadly experienced professionals—not technicians. On-scene commanders using this command-and-control mentality when leading the response organization in a complex situation, such as a major emergency response, could possibly fail because they tend to rely exclusively on their own intelligence, past experience, and the perception they have of a chaotic situation.⁴

Senior leaders on an emergency response force should see quality as an environment to create solutions; not as giving up authority or control. Leaders, according to Gen Ronald R. Fogleman, chief of staff of the Air Force, “create a climate in which everyone can contribute to the maximum of their potential.” However, sometimes leaders in a crisis, facing a fast-paced situation where immediate action is required, may have to resort to the traditional authoritative form of leadership and decision making. The quality method of decision making, using thorough analysis, participation, and consensus building, may not be appropriate when decisions must be made and actions taken instantaneously.⁵ However, this view of leadership is only at the tactical level of an emergency response. Quality concepts will not apply when the fire chief is setting up fire-attack operations on the burning C-141.

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Moreover, the fire chief must demand clear and concise compliance with his directions and decisions during the actual fire-attack operations. His orders on where firefighting equipment will stage and who will set up on the aircraft must be obeyed without hesitation. Instead, quality should be understood in a much broader sense by senior leaders and potential on-scene commanders during a major emergency response. Quality applies to how an emergency response organization plans, prioritizes, and interacts with the many different agencies involved in a major complex response.

Quality Operating Styles

In the Air Force, Quality Air Force (QAF) is a leadership commitment and operational style that inspires trust, teamwork, and continuous improvement.⁶ It involves everyone in an organization in controlling and continuously improving how work is done.⁷ An emergency response organization is no different as it applies quality concepts in its undertaking of emergency responses. The functional organizations around an Air Force installation come together as the DCG, which is made up of medical, security, firefighting, environmental, aircraft maintenance, legal, public affairs, engineering, and command and control personnel. The commander of the DCG applies a quality leadership style that teaches, encourages, sets the vision, and creates the environment for outstanding productivity both before and during an emergency. Gen John Michael Loh, commander of Air Combat Command, says, "Leadership is the art of inspiring others to achieve extraordinary goals and levels of performance. It creates trust, which leads to teamwork and the ability to work toward continuous improvement together in a mission-oriented way, rather than a functionally oriented way."⁸

The quality style of leadership for the on-scene commander must bring down the barriers separating all these functions in order to work together and focus on the incident. Quality leadership requires the relationships between workers and leaders to be restructured. Initial on-scene personnel responding to an emergency will be midgrade civilians or noncommissioned officers (NCO) making the early strategic decisions on how to stabilize the incident. These strategy decisions can have a long-term effect on the total outcome of the emergency. This initial response force could be one fire truck, a security police patrol car, and one ambulance vehicle led by the operations assistant fire chief. Senior leaders must fully empower, train, and hold accountable these personnel. Many times they will be the only ones to respond if the simplicity of the incident allows them to stabilize it without any more help. If the incident becomes more complex, a building-block approach can be used by calling upon those functions in the emergency response force needed for a specific type of incident.⁹ The on-scene commander's job is

therefore not to direct and coordinate. If the building-block approach is going to work, the senior leader must get everyone to think not only about his or her specialty, but how to integrate their work with the overall focus on the incident. This is not the dictatorial, authoritative leadership style so often taken by on-scene commanders in a crisis. The leader's job, instead, should be to shift from performing the coordination to creating the environment within which other people will work productively and coordinate their own activities.¹⁰

The Commanders' Professional Development School, Ira C. Eaker College for Professional Development, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, conducts 15 Air Force on-scene commander courses each academic year to address in greater detail the issues presented in this paper.

Notes

1. John Spanier, "The Games Policy Makers Play," *Games Nations Play*, 7th ed. (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1990), 277-81.

2. Lt Col Thomas F. Wynn Jr., "Total Quality Management and Combat Leadership: Does TQM Stop When The Bullets Start Flying?," *Senior Leaders View Quality: Selected Essays Class of 1994*, Air War College, Air University, Maxwell Air Force Base (AFB), Ala., April 1994.

3. A call to 11 Air Force bases indicated that seven have placards they use at incident sites to control the whereabouts of DCG members. At one installation, they were preparing for an operational inspection and decided to start this system of placards because of a new support group commander.

4. Warren Bennis, *On Becoming a Leader* (Redding, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1993), 1-11.

5. J. Daniel Howard, "The Only Way Ahead," *Proceedings*, June 1992, 86.

6. MSgt Susan Holmes and Ms. Judy Ballance, eds., *The Quality Approach: Helping You Achieve Success in Today's Air Force*, 2d ed. (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air Force Quality Institute, September 1994), 1.

7. David J. Carr and Ian D. Littman, *Excellence in Government: Total Quality Management in the 1990s* (Arlington, Va.: Coopers and Lybrand, 1993), 3.

8. Gen John Michael Loh, speech to the National Quality Month kick-off at the Hampton Roads Quality Council, Hampton, Va., 1 October 1992.

9. Federal Emergency Management Agency, *The Incident Command System* (Washington, D.C.: National Emergency Training Center, National Fire Academy, NFA-ICS-SM, 1 August 1989), 1-6.

10. Tom Shoop, "Brave New Leadership," *Government Executive*, July 1994, 24.